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ABSTRACT

If lack of excellence in the public schools is a problem, it does not follow naturally that teachers and their preparation are the only elements in society at fault. However, it may be that teachers and teacher preparation have not kept pace with societal changes and expectations. To most students it appears that the purpose of education is to enable them to score well on standardized tests. And, teachers, school administrators, school boards, parents, and state legislators seem to believe the myth that good test scores and educational quality are synonymous. In the area of reading instruction, the only real goal should be to help students understand or comprehend the message of the writer. The reading teacher must be more than a skill-driver; he or she must develop a working knowledge of the major theoretical bases on which sound reading instruction can be built. Therefore, a quality teacher education program in reading should include such attributes as established entrance criteria, performance-based curricula, early and frequent field experiences, computation and communication skills measurement, the requirement of an academic major for secondary education majors, and clinical experience supervised by college faculty with classroom teaching experience using an established teaching performance measurement system. Programs that do not measure up to these criteria need modification leading to improved quality. The only result of such activity can be excellence in preparation for teaching reading. (HOD)

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# GOAL: EXCELLENCE IN PREPARATION FOR TEACHING READING

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ABSTRACT

The perceived "crisis" in the schools has brought forth much criticism of schools, teachers and teacher preparation programs, spawned by the Report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education(1983). This paper responds to this criticism by addressing criteria by which teacher preparation should be evaluated and through which the goal of excellence can be reached.

## INTRODUCTION

The mountain of rhetoric concerning the "failure" of American public education has grown to astronomical proportions during the past two years. A careful review of the literature comprising this mountain yields little, if any, previously unknown information about public education. Yet whenever a gap is perceived between the products of a public institution, such as the schools, and the societal ecpectations of that institution, blame is inevitably placed somewhere.

Spawned by widely circulated documents such as the Report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, blame for this gap is placed on schools, teachers and teacher prepration programs. While universal education and equal educational opportunity have been society's expectations for the schools and have been achieved in America, society's expectation has now shifted beyond access to excellence.

Unfortunately, this directive for excellence is ambiguous and appears to be based on several false assumptions about public educa'ion.

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One of these assumptions--the idea that there is a national crisis because schools have not focused on quality--is erroneous. Schools have achieved considrable quality, too much perhaps for society and the economy to absorb. If American education is the dismal failure it is portrayed to be, why are nations around the world modeling their attempts at equal educational opportunity after this country?

While it is true that industrial and educational progress made in Europe and Asia diminishes somewhat the preeminence once enjoyed by America, it is also true that many current foreign innovations are based on American ideas which American public institutions have been slow to consider and implement.

The National Commission's call for increased rigor in secondary education is really a "Cath 22" in that fewer students will be allowed to proceed to higher education under this model, thereby diminishing educational access. Only the highest achievers will be supported, making elementary schools, which received little attention by the Commission, as well as high schools little more than preparatory schools for the most able.

If lack of excellence in the schools is in fact a problem, it does not follow naturally that teachers and their preparation are the only elements in society at fault. However, it may be that teachers and their preparation have not kept pace with societal changes and expectations. For this reason, it becomes important to review the expectation for teachers, in this case, teachers of reading, and criteria by which programs for their preparation should be evalated.

PURPOSE

It is NOT the purpose of this paper to respond point by point to

the criticisms leveled against schools, teachers and teacher preparation programs. One needs only to recall public education's response in the '50's to the public concern raised by Sputnik. Much valuable time and effort was expended in that situation, which was very similar to the present situation, in trying to knock down the straw men of problems presented and solutions proposed to deal with the "crisis" of the time. The result at that time was a series of transient improvements which contributed little meaningful change(Brimelow, 1983). Other forums may be more appropriate for such a discussion.

It IS the purpose of this paper to review commonly held expectations for teachers of reading, and criteria by which programs for their preparation should be evaluated, and through which the goal of excellence can be furthered.

TEACHERS OF READING

It would appear that the purpose of public education, according to most of the critical reports now circulating, is to prepare students to demonstrate their academic skills via achievement test scores(Short, 1984). A careful look into any school classroom today would find students and teachers busily preparing for this demonstration.

If this is indeed the goal of education, it's working. The most recent NAEP results show a pattern of increasing or stable literacy levels over the past ten years. Farr(1981) suggests that these results indicate that we may be at a national all-time high in basic literacy achievement.

To most students in school, it also appears that the purpose of education is to enable them to score well on standardized tests.

Unfortunately, teachers, school administrators, school boards, parents and state legislatures also seem to believe the myth that good test scores and educational quality are synonymous.

They aren't! If as much time and effort was dedicated to REAL teaching and learning, instead of to learning to perform well on tests, the quality of public education would be unquestioned.

So, just what IS the goal or expectation for teachers of reading?

Helping children to learn to read, and to read better, is the goal.

That goal, by the way, is not synonymous with preparing children to produce higher scores on achievement tests.

To achieve that goal, teachers not only help children learn to read through a carefully-planned step-by-step procedure based on a working knowledge of the reading process, but give children time to read materials of interest to them and broaden their horizons by providing new experiences to them(Burmeister, 1983).

The reading teacher must be more than a skill-driller, teacher's manual follower and test preparer. S/he must first develop a working knowledge of the major theoretical bases on which sound reading instruction can be built. These seem to sort themselves today into the "bottom-up," "top-down" or "interactive" philosophies.

Whatever philosophy the teacher buys into, s/he must make sure that all teaching/learning activities help the students move towards the goal of reading instruction, which is, to understand or comprehend the message of the writer. This IS the only real goal of reading instruction. Test scores aren't!

PREPARATION OF TEACHERS

As one authority has acknowledged, "Nothing else will improve our

public schools so much as putting bright, talented teachers into the classrooms. There are no simple ways to improve our schools, but EDUCATORS(emphasis added) are in the best position to effect changes that will see us through into the next century. They must find ways to work with public officials who can see that the problems in public education will not be solved simply by jumping on the latest bandwagon(Mathias, 1984).

What are the characteristics of a quality teacher education program? The answers to this question are many and varied. Often included, however, are such attributes as established entrance criteria, performance-based curricula, early and frequent field experiences, computation and communications skills measurement, the requirement of an academic major(math, science, music, etc.) for secondary education majors, and clinical experiences(internship) supervised by college faculty with classroom teaching experience using an established teaching performance measurement system. In addition, such measures as the number of program graduates securing teaching positions, the perceptions held by area principals and superintendents about the program, the performance of program graduates on teacher certification examinations, the opinions of state and regional program accreditation teams, the number of program graduates receiving regular teaching certificates following a successful year-long internship in a public school system, and the number of program graduates returning for graduate work are added to these criteria of success in measuring quality.

In short, the receptiveness of the various publics served to the graduates of a given teacher preparation program and the ultimate success in the classroom of those graduates are the marks of a high

quality teacher preparation program.

The are many teacher prepration programs that stand up very well when evaluated using the criteria listed above. The graduates of these programs are and will continue to be successful teachers. Change for the sake of change is not justifiable, and the old adage, "if it works, don't fix it" certainly applies to these programs.

Programs that do not measure up very well to these criteria need modification leading to improved quality. One way that leads to such improved quality is to develop a close working relationship with local public school systems, for it is within the larger framework of K-12 public education that noticeable improvements must be developed.

In fact there has been and will continue to be a gradual shift in the locus of power governing entry into the teaching profession from the colleges of education or teacher preparation programs to the public school systems. This shift isn't all bad. Decision makers in teacher preparation programs would do well to note it, not to fear it, and in a spirit of cooperation work with school systems to improve teaching and teacher preparation.

CONCLUSION

It is mandatory that the goal of excellence in preparation for the teaching of reading be achieved. It has been suggested that this goal can be reached if the expectations for reading teachers are clear and if teacher preparation programs are evaluated and modified if necessary according to the list of criteria presented.

The only result of such activity can be excellence in preparation for teaching reading.

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